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Summary: The story of despairing love that just couldn't last, blossoming and withering in the middle of a terrible war.

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****1: DISCOVERY****

Sali 'Dekalsee stood overlooking a great chasm. It was filled with the many lines and creases worn of age, a smoothed out texture long since begun to sag. There didn't appear to be much in the way of sympathy within the thing- but the chasm was proverbial and it's description lay upon the features of the face of a Prophet- a lesser echelon but seeking service directly beneath the Holy Triumvirate that had been Truth, Mercy, and Regret. This Prophet was nothing if but a little short of cruel to those under his command, but no one dared tell him as much.

He hated to hear what he didn't want to, but if he didn't get the truth and found out, the punishment was often far worse than anything he came up with to drop upon the heads of those who brought him what he perceived to be bad news.

'Dekalsee felt betrayed. He stood more or less before the Prophet, although to be accurate he was technically be_hind_ the Prophet, as the fellow had his grav-chair turned about and was looking over the field of faces gathered beneath the grand symposium where a public spectacle would be held- indeed one was being held now. And 'Dekalsee was the spectacle of mention. Nothing the Prophet said penetrated- 'Dekalsee wasn't listening.

The Arbiter had passed through this phase as he was stripped of face and honor, but 'Dekalsee wondered if they did not intend to ensure this_ Elite didn't survive the process to become anything more than worm food. But he hadn't done anything wrongâ€¦|

There was no evidence, only the word of one, and just one, Jiralhanae Captain. 'Dekalsee saw the energy bands holding his hands at eye level turn red, and closed his eyes. This was the way the world would end, in a blaze of fiery agony, without causeâ€| his world, at any rate. But why should it exist, if there be no one to occupy it? His most recent, albeit mostly healed, injury began to twitch. The events leading up to this moment began to reel through his mind, the memory of deployment, of dispersal, of huntingâ€| of discovery, the fight, and thenâ€|

Field Master Corcon 'Czhenalhee's scarred face hung dipped low, the straps holding him in place in the Phantom the only thing keeping him from tipping forwards and falling on the floor. No one could blame him for catching a little rest between drops- inside this Phantom was the only place they had been of late where the enemy were not liable to find them, and kill them in their sleep. More than half of all the others were dozing with him.

'Dekalsee couldn't- he wanted to, wanted desperately for some- but he was too wired, and even though he knew the buzz would wear off rather fast once the strain of action began, it was being rather persistent right when he didn't need it to be. His deep cerulean armor reflected his own down-turned face back at him, the reflective plating layer meant to disperse plasma fire, though, not act as a mirror. The reflection was warped as per the contours of the vest, making part of his face look caved and other parts grotesquely swollen. He knew it wasn't an accurate portrayal of what he looked like, but he knew he wasn't pretty. He'd earned the nickname Half-Jaw, much like the Supreme Commander, although no one called him that to his face. 'Dekalsee was missing the entirety of the lower left and a little over half of the upper left mandibles, but they had been replaced with anamatronic biomechanical ones, because like that he had been unable to eat. They got stiff when they got cold, and it would make his whole head throb in merciless pain if they froze over completely, but he never complained- he was just glad to have gotten them.

Still, the add-on had earned him a few down sides as well. The sweet little female he had been pursuing back home was reportedly seeing someone else, now- someone who's face wasn't half metal. It had hurt, but in the end he realized he couldn't have borne to live with such a fickle, aesthetically oriented female anyway. He was a warrior, and as such he was liable to become crisscrossed with scars as time wore on. If she was so concerned about this one little injury, then anything else of lesser quality might well have produced the same results.

'Dekalsee lifted his head when he heard the engines settle, meaning the Phantom had gone from propulsion to hovering, and was descending to optimal g-lift range of whatever surface they were going to drop onto this time. Right on queue, the intercom barked with the wake-up call from the pilot, and soon everyone was shuffling into position, then down through the lift beam and dispersing across the jungle floor. Uto 'Samamilee went left with Waise 'Frethinee and A'tau 'Graentee, as Field Master Corcon 'Czhenalhee took Ymta 'Nodorvee, Baer 'Denethee, and Ione 'Lavilsee and spread right. Together with Unta 'Manasivee and Qua 'Pythamee, 'Dekalsee pressed directly forward. This was their usual approach, dividing up and dispersing

immediately upon deployment, mostly to avoid being ambushed by a grenade faire.

They had been going through little missions like this all month, ambushing small Human deployments and killing them, then destroying what they had brought with them. Personally 'Dekalsee was a little tired of it all. Added to that, was the fact that all of them were dead tired period, and each was begging for a day in which just to get some rest. It was ungodly cruel to push them this hard- war weary, battle-weary and a small number of them at the ends of their endurance, going back into battle again and again without rest or reprieve was asking dearly for trouble.

Trouble of the fatal kind. Often 'Dekalsee wondered if their orders didn't come from a place that wanted to get rid of them in the most inconspicuous manner- send them to a fight they could not win to kill them where it could not be called murder outright- a "tactical error" only, and the reprimand for such action was far, far less.

But they mustered on. Ten Elites, without baggage of other species, rolling through and wiping out anything Human in their paths. Coming to a stop shy of the Human encampment, 'Dekalsee paused to peer down across the myriad of temporary structures and wandering sentinels. Right away he spotted the sniper on the cliff face, half-way up it and concealed " at least partly, anyway " on a steep ledge. Only the sharp glint of his scope catching on a light somewhere down beneath him had betrayed his presence, but now 'Dekalsee was on the lookout for more of the same. If they only had one sniper they were fools, even if all they had was one sniper rifle. A scoped carbine could do just fine, if the rounds and range didn't go quite as far.

Beside him, Qua sagged to his knees, exhausted. His breath was ragged and heavy, even though the short sprint between deployment and destination had not been that far " nor that unforgiving. The terrain here, while a bit lumpy, was more or less flat, unless one came upon a bluff like the one this base was camped at the bottom of. But they hadn't had to cross any of those

'Dekalsee knelt beside his comrade, and lifted his head to see into his eyes. He'd been hit upside the head once, but it hadn't affected him then and everyone had blown it off as a mild headache. But now, almost fifteen hours later, Qua's pupils had dilated unevenly. Unta came to a stop, sinking to his own knees, wearily, beside them.

"Is he alright?" Unta asked.

"I fear not." 'Dekalsee answered. "I see sign of concussion. It could easily be severe."

"But he was unaffected earlier!" Unta protested.

"Perhaps he merely didn't have the time to realize how badly he was hurt." 'Dekalsee let the sagging warrior lean on a tree, as he tried valiantly just to contain his breath. If indeed the injury was serious, Qua would die, and he didn't even need much more than a short nap to end him as such. 'Dekalsee rocked back on his heels, thinking. As soon as this mission was completed, they would be whisked away to the next known Human installation. And the next, and the next, until they had all dropped either dead or unconscious and

unable to take another step on their own power.

Qua's helmet grated against the bark of the tree he was leaning on, but his breath slowly began to quiet. Unta stepped past them to make sure the Humans had not seen them, but in the time it took for 'Dekalsee's gaze to follow his motion and then turn back to see Qua, he had faded out completely.

"No!" 'Dekalsee shook the warrior, attempting to waken him. "You need to stay conscious!" He paused, aware he had wasted his effort. Qua's head sank forward onto his breast, his mandibles spreading against the weight of his head. If he wasn't dead, he certainly wasn't conscious, and might soon well be. 'Dekalsee muttered an expletive, but he knew there was nothing he could do so he turned his attention to Unta. At various angles of entry, the signal to begin the attack was relayed between the divisions of their team, but despite Qua's condition, Unta signaled green. "What are you doing? We need to fall back." 'Dekalsee snapped.

"There's no time." Untal responded. "And there's nothing we can do for him anyway." He pulled the Carbine from his shoulder and started to aim for a patrolling Marine, but 'Dekalsee yanked his barrel upwards.

When Unta snarled at him, he said, "Sniper first, idiot."

Unta's expression turned puzzled for a moment, before he looked through his scope again at what he'd been aimed at. Sure enough, there was the sniper of mention, so he placed several rounds downrange in that area before paying any mind at all to anyone else. 'Dekalsee cast one last look back at Qua, sighed and shook his head, then turned away, lifting a pair of type-25 Directed Energy Rifles.

Pressing forward into what was quickly becoming chaos, he spotted Ymta with a pair of his own t-25DERs. The combined fire of the nine remaining Elites served well to decimate the Human resistance, but before the firefight was quite overwith, Ymta, Uto, Waise, and A'tau had all been felled. There was no way to know if they were just down or actually dead, but there would be time for that later. 'Dekalsee's own shield emitter was drained, and he was still taking fire, building up on his already worn tolerance for injury. For the most part his armor layer protected him, but it was neither absolute nor impenetrable, and any persistent enough shooter would eventually wear a hole through even his thickest available plate.

A three round burst tore through his thigh, turning him about in the gathering dust cloud, before dropping him in his tracks. Coughing at his sudden submersal in the thick cloud of airborne dust and grit, 'Dekalsee fought to his knees, and then his hooves, but only one of his legs would hold him up now.

Finding what he thought was cover between two parted crates stacked against a building, 'Dekalsee leaned back into the slot and tried to wave the dirt away, unable to get a decent breath for it all. Past the boxes, he saw a pair of his brethren run past, and wondered at their ability. He recognized Corcon as one of them, but the other escaped before he could be identified so it didn't make that much difference. He had all of three options of which to choose from—Ione, Unta, or Baer. Everyone else was down.

The memory of leaving Qua at the treeline to die still haunted him, but Unta had been right " there _was_ nothing they could have done for him. 'Dekalsee seized his t-25DERs again when a trio of Humans appeared in his view, and he fired them until they overheated and began to steam. He let them rest, though, seeing all three had fallen accordingly. Recovered a little from the shock of injury, and able now to breathe clearly in the settling dust, 'Dekalsee took hold of one of the crate's tops, and began to pull himself from the dust to his hooves. Once upright, though, he realized quickly that there was another Human there, off to his left, with the barrel of it's BR leveled at his head over that crate. He looked at them, tasting the blood, grit and sweat on his mandibles.

Was this his end? Perhaps more honorable one than poor Qua, but 'Dekalsee had no desire to die. He could hear his hearts pounding in his head, and little else. He heard the trigger depress with a definite _click_, the rounds following the first chamber and fire with a triplicate of _whap_s_, and he swore he saw the point of the first bullet coming down the barrel even before he thrust out into a ducking lunge, to the side.

The bullets missed; but now he was spilled in the dirt on his side, and in no condition to find his hooves quickly. Clawing at the ground, he managed to rise to a knee and swipe the BR to the side when the Human adjusted its aim, and the next three round burst went wild like the first. Slapped out of balance, the Human staggered backwards a couple of steps, but 'Dekalsee knew he couldn't run. He had to kill the Human or he would die instead. So he pressed his good hoof to the ground and launched at them, determined to wring them in half if he had to, to end this.

On impact the Human gave a forced grunt, then gagged under his weight when they landed back in the dust together, with the far larger Elite on top. The butt of the BR found his metal mandibles, and it turned his head up and to the side, but he came back with a hard, solid blow straight to the visor plate on the Human's own helm. It cracked, and the second blow broke it, but that hurt his fist as much as the Human's face, as both were suitably filled with shards of reinforced bulletproof fiberglass. After his cringing hesitation, though, he was rewarded with a responding fist in the gut, right beneath where his armored vest ended. The other fist was aimed strangely, but that was the one that got his attention- it went up through his mandibles and slammed hard into his throat, throwing his head back as he gagged.

Somehow, the Human pushed him off, but the first thing it did then was wrest free of the broken helmet. When 'Dekalsee came back, he was greeted by a round-swung sphere of hardened Human alloy and shattered glass " the Human's helmet, used as a billy club on his battered head. He spilled the other way over onto his side, seeing nothing but stars and coughing and gasping past the dirt and the blow to his throat. Unable or unwilling to fight this Human anylonger, 'Dekalsee curled his fingers around fistfuls of the loose, dry soil, attempting to crawl away. He didn't even know which anymore.

The Human said something, something rash, something vulgar, an unkind string of words aimed at him, and then it kicked him. There was a splash of footsteps towards where the offending BR had been dropped, as the Human sought it, and picked it up. 'Dekalsee looked up at the

Human as it slapped the dust off the weapon, and aimed it at him. At his head.

No, no " he didn't want to die. With the last of his strength he mustered the will to rise, and all at once he pulled from the ground and slammed the Human down, sending the BR skittering away in pieces. Helmetless, he could see the creature's widened eyes, how they reflected the fear of the creature's heart to him. But he couldn't keep on " he was failing, fading, collapsing, even as he seized the Human by the neck and yanked it from the ground to slam it into a nearby wall. He was leaning more pressure on that grasp than he normally would have, using the outstretched arm on the wall to hold himself upright. His other arm drew back, that hand closing into a fist.

Ebon locks of sweat slicked hair surrounded an oval ivory face, seemingly sculpted from the bones themselves, a master carver somehow able to breathe more life into his work than any other. Deep, dark eyes the color of emerald seas had been set into that face, the trembling, frightened expression written into the features seeming to cry foul upon them. None such expression belonged on a face so pure" so pretty.

Grime and grit had been smeared across the face, but beneath it all there was no question of the quality of the skin, the eyes" captivating, beautiful eyes" if this had been a Sangheili, there would have been no end of those who sought after them. Was it male? Female? It was difficult to tell" but even as the image began to blur, and swim, 'Dekalsee heard the same words that had been echoing in his brain all week.

"Please" I don't want to die." From a voice as sweet as honey.

Black as ebon as her hair came up fast and hard to meet him.

Fine lines of concentration were beginning to show on the Elite's scarred face. Even as unfamiliar as she was with their anatomy and reaction to deep wounds, it was obvious his face was crossed with lines of ancient injury. Two of his four mandibles had to be made out of metal, to that end, as even the somewhat moist inside of them was that same steel silver-color. He was suffering, that much was obvious. But if that was true, why had they come and attacked? Elites were renowned for their strength, their stamina, and even the Humans had come to realize the honor structure of their social workings.

It was damned stupid to rush a battle with soldiers about to drop from exhaustion. Was that exhaustion? Wasn't it? His injuries, though some of them she knew were several days old, were hardly fatal or even especially debilitating.

Petty Officer Haylee Wu had never ever seen an Elite this close to dropping. But he'd still won. And he was going to smash her face in and leave her for whatever kind of carrion eaters this world harbored. The only thing she could hear, though, was the sound of her own pulse in her ears, pounding hard and loud, drowning out the sound of her harsh, ragged breathing as she fought down her terror.

For some reason, he didn't finish it, he just hung there, as if studying her. And if she hadn't known better, she might have guessed his expression was changing, too " as though he'd begun to see something he found peculiar. Maybe if she asked, maybe if she just offered him the chance to grasp a superior status between them, he just might only take her prisoner and let her live. If she asked"

"Please" She rasped, hardly able to taste her own tongue anymore. "I don't want to die." It sounded feeble at best" he narrowed his eyes.

Wu braced for the fall of that last blow, well aware she might just have wakened him from that reverie and reminded him what he was looking at was one of the enemy of his Covenant. But his withdrawn arm began to sag, and the grip around her neck loosened slightly. Elation wove through her terror, even though it was still prominent. And then she shrieked in sudden fright when he piled in the dust at her feet, not having expected that. Freed, Wu could have done anything she cared to " but she just stood there for the longest time, just staring at the fallen warrior before her.

He was down, and she was alive. What had stayed that last, final blow was still a mystery to her, but all sounds of fighting throughout the base had quieted. Still shaking from her experience, Wu staggered past the Elite and away, looking for something or someone familiar. She needed a Human face, a Human voice" something to assure her she was still alive in fact and not just in theory, something to ground her quivering mind after what she had just witnessed.

He'd had her where he wanted her, she knew. But he'd just stood there, inches from killing her, and stared her down, almost as if he meant something else by her. But as she walked the base, only horror and death greeted the dusty, empty streets and paths they had worn into the dry, arid soil. It hadn't rained in six months, keeping with an almost sand pit in the middle of a jungle. Friends she had known for years, soldiers she had known for only the duration of this assignment, all of them she found were dead, felled by the wave of attacking Covenant. The final scene brought up something new, though " there were three Elites, piled in the dust around one Human, with all the rest of her fellows scattered elsewhere.

He was still breathing.

Wu knelt beside him, took his pulse, and raised an eyelid. "Harrison?" She queried. "Harrison, can you hear me?" She shook his shoulder, but he didn't even groan. What injuries he'd gained for the fighting were severe, but Wu understood she was far too out of it herself to do him much good. She was shaking too hard, even still" there were no tears as she watched Harrison fade, his broken body grinding finally to a stop before her.

"Am" She whispered. "Am I the only one left?"

There had been three hundred Marines here, a "strategic" location to "hide" some troops where they could be called upon from virtually anywhere on the planet. Here was nowhere, halfway between here and there, in the middle of a giant jungle that didn't have much in the way of anything else in it. Standing, Wu breathed deep, turned, and

walked away. For the first time that season, the cloudbank on the horizon appeared to be getting closer. If he was still alive, she had a prisoner to secure.

And she didn't want to do it in the rain.

****2: NOTHING IS SACRED****

Sleet poured past the shuttered, glass-less windows, banged at the walls and doors. The chill permeated the very air she breathed, but she didn't care " in the biggest building they had planted here, in the subterranean level, the sounds were muffled at best, and the silence wasn't too much to bear because of it. Stripped of her ODS armor, Wu stood in nothing more than her fatigues pants and an olive green tee. She had even removed her combat boots, standing barefoot on the cold, concrete floor.

In the next room was a shower " unpartitioned, but a shower nonetheless, and she had never felt more in need of one than right now. The only other survivor of the battle that had decimated her post had been cuff-linked to a support pillar at the opposite end of the rectangular subterranean building. He'd been piled unceremoniously there, but she had taken the time to pull off everything she could make move from his person. If his armor suit had any special powers, he was bereft of those, too.

Passing through the door, Wu peeled her tee over her head, and dropped it to the side, beginning to unfasten the buttons on her pants as she strode towards the nearest nozzle head. Stripping them off, she flung them back towards where her tee had fallen with a well-aimed kick of a leg, then peeled her grimy, sweat-glued underwear off directly under the nozzle. She didn't care if it got wet " she wasn't going to put them back on anyway. Wu pulled the handle, and stood still for several minutes as the hot rinse began to shift off most of the loose filth. After the water had drummed on her head for a while, she lifted the soap and began to actually wash. With the water went much of her memory, as she washed the horrors of watching everyone die but the enemy away. If she was to survive, she didn't need them, as the collection of dog tags with her armor were reminder enough.

As soon as she was done, she lifted the handle to stop the flow, and turned back to the door. There was nothing in here but the showers " she would need to pass the door to find something clean to wear. The idea was all that kept her mind from reeling against the terrifying thoughts of isolation, of the intense burning burden of absolute loss, and the heavy notion of what she was now up against, all _alone_.

Finding a towel, she dried off, then dug into a locker and dressed. Swiping a comb off the top compartment, she forced it through her chin-length hair, then tossed it back without bothering to pull the hairs out of the tines that had stuck in them. Closing the door with a flick of her wrist, the locker slammed shut with a resonant bang. Stepping back from it, she sat on the edge of a bunk and crammed her feet down back into her boots. When they were tied, she stood, and moved down the narrow corridor between rows of bunks, through another door and past the communications control room to the one where she had left the Elite.

When she opened the door, a square of light from behind her fell across him, but he hadn't moved from where she had put him, so she stepped through and flipped on the lights. Unlike herself, she noted, this creature still looked decidedly formidable, without his military things. Wu only looked formidable with her ODST armor on â€" otherwise all she looked like was jailbait. Squatting near his head, she swatted it a couple of times. "Come on, big guy, time to wakey."

The Elite didn't stir.

Wu sighed, and looked him over again. The signs of battle wear were obvious, but the odd pattern of stripes in his skin over his shoulders appeared odd to her. Like abuse. But if someone had taken a lash to him, there was no overt evidence of why. Idly, she picked at one, noting the depth of the brown surrounding each deep tan line. His skin wasn't black, but it was certainly dark, and the number of non-injury related blemishes were near to nonexistent â€" she hadn't examined him completely, but so far she hadn't found even one. No moles, no freckles, no weird spots or marks. Wu envied him that â€" whatever kind of care he gave his skin, she wanted to know about it.

She paused when the muscle under the skin she was looking at moved, then withdrew in a startled fright when he inhaled as if to speak. When she came to rest, sure enough, he was looking at her. "Okay." She told herself. "Now what?"

His mandibles bent slightly â€" something of an expression of mirth. "Only you would know, Human."

She allowed her crouched pose to melt into a seated position on the floor, and she crossed her arms. "I don't know what to ask you." She admitted. "I don't even know why I didn't just shoot you and put you out of our misery."

He tipped his head, even though it was still on the floor. "Our?"

Wu nodded. "Our. You're worse than beat to shit, all your friends are deadâ€" and so are mine."

He closed his eyes for a moment. "We did not need your help to obtain that end, as unfortunate as that sounds."

"Iâ€" guess I noticed that." Wu agreed. "I don't understand it, though. Your kind don't often act that way."

"Ordersâ€" he began, reflecting, "â€"are orders. You follow, or you die."

"Seems to me you follow and you die." Wu mentioned. "Why were we so important that we needed to be dealt with now, instead of waiting a couple of days for you boys to catch your breath?"

"I do not know." He admitted. "All I know is we were not the most kindly looked upon by the Prophet of Lamentations."

"Never heard of him."

"He works for Regret's division of the Covenant Fleets." The Elite

elaborated. "He doesn't get mentioned much."

"I can vouch for that." Wu nodded. "You speak pretty good English."

"We learn. You cannot successfully obtain data from an enemy you cannot understand."

"Fair." She agreed. "So tell me— um. Let's start with your name. I got to have something to call you by— you can't always be 'hey you' if we mean to do much more communications beyond yes or no questions."

"My name?"

Wu nodded. "Yes. What is it?"

He heaved a deep sigh, then slowly, painfully, almost, pressed his battered form from the floor to lean against the piling he was tied to. Once he had obtained a more or less upright position, he answered, "I am Sali 'Dekalsee."

"I'm Haylee Wu. You can call me Wu, like everyone else."

He seemed to smile. "The name bears similarities to a word in my native tongue."

She cocked her head, almost smiling too — interested, she prompted, "Well, what's it mean?"

He looked at her again. "Alike, akin, the same— similar. You realize you both bear that title as well as having put voice to the words I had only thought before."

Wu gave him an incredulous look. "What would that be?"

He shifted, slightly, and spared a moment to cringe at something. "You said you didn't want to die."

The memory washed through her. "Oh." Refocusing on him, she added, "You were thinking that?"

"I was."

"I suppose I could see why."

"We are alike, you and I." He mentioned. "Neither of us want to be here— neither of us desire death, yet both of us stand here now without comrade or brother at arms. We, as it were, are alone."

"Why didn't you kill me?" Wu blurted, suddenly.

'Dekalsee tipped his head at her. "I didn't want to."

She hesitated, staring at him as if seeing him for the first time. "You—?" He didn't appear to be making it up, at least not yet, but what other reason was any more plausible? It didn't make any sense, though, for it to take him that long to decide the Human he was beating up on was going to live through it. And then he'd passed out in front of her. Like he'd expected no less than the same of herself.

Wu couldn't imagine a more ludicrous idea, considering the war, and the already steep casualties mounting on both sides. Glassed worlds, destroyed holy relics and millions of dead soldiers on both sidesâ€¦ and here this Elite had had the audacity to think he could deliberately spare a Human and live to tell of it later.

She shook her head. "We are at war, you and I. You should have killed me. Because nowâ€¦ now I have to kill you."

'Dekalsee only shook his head. "No. Our peoples are at war. Youâ€¦ individually, the Covenant has nothing against you. Nor does Humanity owe me any grievance."

"That's an awful fine line there." Wu mentioned. "You have signed your own death warrant. Even if I wanted to, I couldn't keep you alive anyway â€" the UNSC would kill us both for theâ€¦ infraction. Unless I were to hand you directly over to them for torture and interrogation. At which point you would be as useful as dead anyway. To the Covenant, I mean."

"You aren't that cruel."

Wu paused. "What?"

"You aren't that cruel." He said, again. "If you were going to kill me or condemn me to such fate as you describe, you would not have bothered learning my name."

Wu sighed. "Look â€" I'm just a joe soldier grunt pounding sand down here where the blood and muck mix with the bullets. And so, I might point out, are you. I don't own a lick of sway, neither do you."

"You're alone."

"Only because you murdered my friends!!" She suddenly screamed at him, getting closer.

He didn't even flinch. "You murdered mine." He answered, calmly. "There, we are even. You can hold no more against me than I can against you, Wu. As I have said. We are alike. Not friendsâ€¦ not allies. But we are alike, like that as not. It is the truth."

Wu exhaled through her teeth, and sat back, scowling at him. "I should just kill you right nowâ€¦ then I could pack up some shit and get the fuck out of here before more of your kind come through and finish this place off."

'Dekalsee only sighed, and lowered his head. "I see now why there is a war between us, at last." Looking at her again, he explained; "We will never understand you, why you do the things you do. You took my weapons and my armor, you tied me in here, and only now do you decide my fate? You speak kindly enough to me until I mention our collective situation, and then you fly in the face of the truth and threaten to end me. No, Wuâ€¦ there will never be understanding between us, not if this is what it means to be Human."

Wu sat in shock, staring at him. It was the coldest, cruelest analogy of her people she'd ever heard so farâ€¦ but he hadn't exaggerated anything. He was right. Gathering her wits back about her, she

composed herself, and responded, "Then it shouldn't surprise you one bit when I finally do make my mind up and you find yourself still here, aliveâ€¦ and still chained to that damned pillar. You have yourself a good long think, 'Dekalsee, I'm going to get something to eat and then I'm getting some sleep. Whatever I decide to do with you, _I'm_ leaving here in the morning."

'Dekalsee only nodded. "May you find something worth the trouble out there."

His words followed her out the door, and even when she slammed it shut behind her, they still echoed in her head. Finally, the tears came. She leaned on the door, sliding down it to the floor to curl her legs against her chest and her arms around them. All the pent up shock and trauma, the horror and fear, came out at last. She couldn't bear the silence alone, knew if she was found by the wrong party out there in the woods, the UNSC would never find her body or know her fate. She would be written off as MIA and not given a second thought as the bloody war raged on.

It took a whole hour for her tears to dry, but when the last of them had, she pulled herself from the floor and went meekly through the communications room to find an MRE or something else edibleâ€¦ she didn't even know if she could keep it down, as she was, but she knew she needed to eat something, and it was best if she didn't wait until she had left and then have to pry into what little she would be able to carry. It would be a bad idea, logistically speaking. Since the building she was in was not the mess shed, she had to do some digging to find something, but once she had, she ate it as if it was the first meal she'd had in a week. When it was gone, she fell across the nearest rack and curled up under a green woolen blanket at one end to see about catching some sleep.

Hopefully, the day's events wouldn't manifest as nightmares and keep her awake all night long. Wu found a semblance of rest, though, despite her related fears, and despite the thunder outside and the storm-related rattle on the building above her. At midnight, her eyes opened as she jerked awake, tension rippling through her body as she sought the image she had dreamed a moment ago.

Failing to find the Elite standing over her with murderous intent, she allowed herself to relax somewhat, although the feeling couldn't last. Pushing the blanket aside, Wu rolled her legs off the bunk and sought the floor. Finding her feet, she padded lightly and cautiously down the corridors, through the doors to the back room, though she held in her hand a flashlight rather than flipping switches as she went.

The significantly dimmer light failed to raise alarm, she'd found, as well as some people being able to sleep through a passing flashlight whereas it was near impossible not to be wakened by the overheads. Finding the Elite with her beam, she stood there studying him for a time, wondering what had really awoken her.

'Dekalsee, to his credit, appeared to be asleep. But one thing he most definitely was, was still tied to the pillar. Then she heard a familiar thumping pulse river bating through the ground. Her flashlight's aim dropped, and her gaze went to the ceiling in despair.

There was only one craft that pulsed like that " _Phantom!_ Quickly she raced from the room, to her armor, and began to strap it on as fast as she could and not get tangled. Then she picked up her BR and made sure it was clean, loaded and cocked. Having taken all of ten minutes to finish preparing, she cautiously made her way to the stairwell, and up it, gun first. Peering past the top of the floor at ground level, Wu traced her rifle around, following her gaze as she swept the vicinity for unfriendly troops. Finding none inside the building, she came the rest of the way up, and went to a window to see out. There appeared to be a strobing light out there, sweeping over what could only have been the remains of the battle scenes. Lifting a shutter with the barrel of her gun, she looked through the pinhole slot it afforded her, not daring open it all the way.

There, walking through the mud in the pouring sleet and rain, was a single Elite warrior, scoping the place out. He paused beside each of his brethren, as if checking for signs of life, but left each where he found them ultimately. He seemed to think there was one or two missing, though, and didn't appear satisfied at all that he'd found them all. Wu let the shutter back down, slowly and carefully, then latched it again when it was shut.

Turning from the window, she went back downstairs and slammed the door to 'Dekalsee's impromptu cell open. He flinched, blinking against her flashlight. "How many of you were there, 'Dekalsee??" She demanded.

"Iâ€| ten." He answered, puzzled and still a bit groggy. "What are you doing?"

"Your friends have come looking for you, and the guy they got on grave detail seems to think he can count pretty good. You're missing, 'Dekalsee, and he doesn't like that idea."

'Dekalsee shook his head to clear it. "They're here, now?"

"Yes, here " now." She answered. The look he gave her almost made her heart stop, following that statement. After a long moment to consider, she asked, quieter, "You want to go with them, D?"

"You would allow me?"

Wu stepped forward, and lowered to a knee in front of him. Things seemed so different, suddenly, with the knowledge she now owned " if he went to them, he could easily tell them about her, but if he was found without being freed, she would likely have been killed beforehand. Still, Wu didn't feel so threatened at all. She raised her gloved hand, and touched the side of his head lightly, almost in caress. "You let me live, 'Dekalsee." She said, softly. "I owe you oneâ€| this at least."

Pilot Hamu 'Kaskalee understood the scene that lay before him. But there were two of the team missing. Qua, if he recalled correctly, and Sali. It had been such a sad waste to send them to their ends this way. But to all appearances it seemed as though despite all odds they had gotten the job done anyway " not a single Human here was alive, and despite the rain he could tell there weren't many at all who might have escaped. Where there was sign, there were bodies.

Sangheili and Human alike, though far fewer of the former.

He sighed, and shook his head. Sleet burned against his armor, but he didn't care. The cold reminded him of the scene he knew would be burned deep into his brain for years to come. No one, not one, friend or foe, had survived.

Motion off to his left caught his eye, and his Carbine had come off his back and the first round was out before he realized it had zinged off an energy shield. He lowered the weapon, shocked. Staggering, wounded, the Elite sagged to a knee in the mud. Hamu rushed to his side, and picked him back up, his Carbine back at rest where it belonged as he helped the warrior to the violet gravity lift beneath his Phantom.

Once inside, he propped his load against one wall, and looked him over. Filth covered his armor from top to bottom, the mud an odd black or grey color following any open wounds, as the rain had not allowed much else to show. Blood, water and earth had all mixed into a slick cake. How the warrior had managed to get up, to walk to the Phantom from any kind of distance at all, was a wonder.

Slicking off the muck so the warrior's insignia might be seen, Hamu identified him as Sali; and though rather badly wounded, he held to his wits, conscious and for the most part coherent. "Where is Qua?" Hamu asked. "I could not find him."

"Dead." Sali answered. "The restâ€¦ theyâ€¦ all dead."

"Where?"

"Treelineâ€¦ he didn't make it inside."

Hamu nodded, thinking. "Alright â€" I am going to get you out of here. Hold fast to your wit, Sali, and perhaps you might see a brighter day." Hamu started for the cockpit. Shy of the destination, though, he paused, and turned back. "And the Humans, are they all dead, too?"

Sali turned his head, to look back. When their gazes had met, he posed his answer; "All of them."

****3: SECRET FAITH****

Sali 'Dekalsee walked straight and tall for the first time in better than five months â€" no longer exhausted beyond reason, wounded or worn thin, he finally could walk straight and tall. It felt like nothing better had ever happened to him. Recommissioned to the Fleet of Intentional Shadow, 'Dekalsee was taken far from the planet where he had found the Human female named Haylee Wu.

Thoughts of her, what she had said to him, remained, but so too did the actions and words of those brothers he had lost that same day. She had been the most peculiar thing to happen to him, he was sure, but even as the war wore on he didn't â€" couldn't â€" regret letting her live. When standing on a battlefield, he would often scan the faces of the fallen enemy, looking for hers, yet hoping never to find it.

Were that she were to die, he did not want to be the one that had killed her. Time flew fast, though, as battle after battle saw them closer and closer to their ultimate target — Regret was seeking the Human's home world, was seeking to destroy it and with it the last of Humanity. 'Dekalsee watched in an almost sadness as a Human colony was glassed, watched as the Human's cruisers died in vacuum. Where the Human Demon was was often bounced between Fleets, because he moved around so much it was hard for one to keep tabs on him. From the first Halo, he'd disappeared, but there was fresh speculation on where he'd run to.

Anyone would have — Earth. 'Dekalsee often wondered if Wu was at Earth, wondered if he would find her again before she was killed. Surprise came the day he learned of a systems hack he was allowed to look at right before an orbital bombardment was ordered, and he found himself scrolling down the list of Human names under duty posting in the area. When asked what he was doing that for, he responded that the Human Demon might be present, and it would be prudent to know. This spurned more than a few of his brethren to take up the same study — it helped, but not specifically with what he was really doing.

A strange chill set in when he found a Wu — the only Wu on base, and her other name was Haylee. The imagined picture of her decimated body lying in a cremated, glassed-over locale horrified him, but he knew he had a small amount of time to act before the bombardment began — they weren't yet done hacking for information. 'Dekalsee moved with a purpose, then, skirting all questioning looks and querulous fellows as he moved, taking a path through the ship down to the Maintenance Sector where he was less liable to be caught.

And he sent a message, with the express hope she got it and got out before it was too late. Alarms screamed suddenly as a Human ship was detected nearby. He refrained valiantly from smiling, as he made his way back again, even stopping a fellow warrior to ask what was being done about that other ship. It might or might not be shown that a message was sent to the planet, but tracing it to 'Dekalsee would be nigh impossible.

The Human ship took several hard hits, but it jumped away again, escaping total destruction. 'Dekalsee was never more glad to lose prey. So it went for more than a month — every time he found Wu at the end of his guns, he always told her — even when it began to become apparent that someone was feeding the Humans intel to some degree and preparing them, warning them, of Covenant movements. A fleet three times the size of what they had anticipated happened once, and an empty, barren planet happened twice.

The Supreme Commander was becoming short of temper, as his fleet was slowly being torn to shreds. Finally, with the Demon sighted on the second known Halo, and tempers flaring for the implications on what he would do to it, Earth found and a battle begun there, 'Dekalsee found himself back aground, leading a team of Elites against a Human base that was not only deeply entrenched but also heavily guarded.

The Covenant didn't care for intel anymore. They just didn't have enough time to glass the planet and had dropped forces on the surface with the sole purpose of annihilating all things Human. 'Dekalsee was worried — swarming around him were Grunts and Jackals, a dozen or

so pairs of Hunters assigned to the planet's cleansing, and he hadn't had time to see if Wu was here.

And if she was, to warn her to get out. He felt every single Human that was mowed in their path was her, but as he sought her, he always failed to find her. It was partly comforting and partly alarming, not knowing where she was, or if she was in danger he couldn't avert. Finally, at the base of a hill honeycombed by Human bunkers, their progress was halted as Human snipers picked off the ones unlucky enough to be caught exposed. As he watched an Elite's helmet blossom a flower of violet blood before he crumpled, 'Dekalsee was hit by a thought; what if he'd been a fool all this time, and Wu was using his concern to cause his people more hurt than hell could provide? What if he was a traitor to his own?

What if Wu didn't give a damn about what happened to him? As much as it hurt to think those things, he still couldn't shake the feeling. The order to assemble a counter-sniper force came out a little easier, though, and as the Elites and Jackals picked up their t-50SRs and began to hunt for long distance prey.

'Dekalsee was able to take the hill, but the bunkers turned out to be a hopelessly confusing maze " so he had everyone split up into teams of four to explore the whole thing as much as possible at once, and to retreat and wait for backup if they encountered anything greater than that many could handle.

At the end of yet one more hall deep in the side of the hill, 'Dekalsee was surprised by a Human grenade smacking off the wall by his head. Alarmed, he dove the other way, missing being blown to ribbons by more than the Elite beside him. Returning with enough fire to melt the steel-clad walls behind the cover the Human had, 'Dekalsee was able to come around it, adjusting his aim so the Human no longer had any cover. He was trapped " and all 'Dekalsee had to do was shoot him.

He paused, but there was no doubt this one was a male, brown buzz cut hair with freckled skin and blazing brown eyes. Hatred boiled within them, as the creature lunged at him. 'Dekalsee swung his t-25DER at the creature's head, cracking the weapon against his bucket helmet, but though there was no real damage to the helmet or the Human's head, the force of the blow compressed his vertebrae so hard that they snapped apart, and the Human collapsed dead.

Turning from the scene, 'Dekalsee looked up at the remaining two of his companions, Grunts both, in time to see one scoop a grenade from the fallen Elite's compliment to prime and throw down the next hall up. Looking past them, 'Dekalsee froze as if shot.

Wu!!

Immediately he was upon the offending Grunt, and the creature's arm came out of it's socket before he bashed it's face in, and then he was slamming the other to the wall with the primed grenade attached to it. The tank on it's back split, and the detonation was rendered twofold. When it was over, 'Dekalsee stood without shielding, and without ally, looking down at what he had done. Lifting his gaze, he stared at the Human at the other end of the hall.

There was a BR pointed at him. Was he so wrong?

But there was no mistaking her. It was her, Haylee Wu, bright green eyes set like emeralds in an ivory face. He knew â€" there was no visor on her helmet this time. Still, though her aim hadn't wavered, she wasn't shooting. 'Dekalsee took a step towards her, and she stiffened, lifting the stock to her shoulder, planting it there firmly. A warning.

"Wu." He spoke. "You do not remember me?"

Her mouth opened slightly, as the look in her eyes changed. Slowly her aim lowered, though not all the way. "â€| D?"

'Dekalsee only nodded his head.

Her expression seemed to melt entirely, as the aim of her BR found the floor by her boot. Forsaking all that was happening around them, she closed the gap between them at a run, slamming into him bodily and closing her arms around his chest in a hug.

"You're alive!" She cried, ecstatic.

He curled downwards slightly to accommodate her smaller frame in the embrace, beginning to feel much of the pain in his soul flowing away. "I live." He answered. "And you."

She pulled back enough to see his face. "Why did you come for me, 'Dekalsee? If either of our peoples find out, we're both dead."

"I'm here on orders to kill you all." He answered, plainly. "I had hoped you would not be hereâ€| I tried to warn youâ€|"

"I know." She smiled â€" the expression shone in her eyes. "I got your messages, D. I was able to get out. Thank you. For everything."

He smiled back. Perhaps it hadn't been so wrong after all. "You cannot stay here, Wu. We have this place overrun â€" you must leave."

"I knowâ€|" She sighed, seeming to droop with disappointment pertaining to the idea. "But I don't want toâ€| I finally get to see you again, after all." Before he could compose a reply to her words, she reached up, and took his head in her hands, pulling it down far enough to reach with her own â€" and she placed a light kiss between his eyes. "I don't want to miss you anymore, 'Dekalsee." She added, her tone hushed.

"Maybeâ€|" He began, speculative, "â€|you don't have to."

The hope shining in those deep green eyes could have melted the stone heart of a San' Sayuun. 'Dekalsee didn't need near quite so much prompting. "Where would we go that we would not be found? What end can this have if not a premature one, as an execution on behalf of those that find us?" The questions were despairing â€" her tone was not.

'Dekalsee couldn't see any reasonable answer to them, but at that moment it really didn't seem to matter that much. Between them, their location changed, two moving as one away from the scene of a great

crime, but yet creating a new one for which there was no known law to break, short of redefinition in order to include it under the treason umbrella.

In the abandoned, dark recesses of an officer's quarters, away from the main arteries of the bunker-base and away from the fighting and the armies of both sides, away and alone, isolated from it all, in a silence broken only by the sound of breath and the distant thumping of artillery, a new bridge was built.

Her ODS armor seemed to slide right off of her, his finding no more hold on him either. Piece by piece, parts at a time, until all of it had been shed, forsaken in light of a moment that could only be defined as unique, as a cherished treasure found nowhere else. Wu felt no coherent ordered thought as her skin tingled with a fire borne of passions, her exposed, vulnerable body close enough to touch, close enough to become lost in his. Scars of a million battles faded away, all relevant things finding their places beneath the primary ambition.

Sali had not known a surrender could be so absolute, yet within it there lay more power than any defiance of mastery. There was little room for negotiation, yet all dues were paid, all bets called, leaving only the now. She felt so soft, supple and yielding. Between them, an alignment happened, causing a stir of bright stars, explosions of miniature sensation becoming great and mighty within the span of a single heart's beat. She opened to him, invited him. There was no temptation, no demands, no pleas. Only collaboration, only cooperation, a joint goal. He found her invitation and accepted it, entering the domain never formerly explored. Tension was followed by release, as she found him great indeed and he found her forgiving enough to accommodate it.

Motion between them felt like a flowing, as a bonding unlike anything ever before known to any was discovered. She prompted, he responded, she called, and he came. The flight lasted for a single eternity, without beginning, without end, without middle. It came to be, and it was, and there it stayed. Her song was unmatched in beauty, her form, her being, one so unique it could not be duplicated, nor would there ever be another like it found. His reach took him to the top, where there was no more, where up ceased, and there he found the epicenter of her yearning. The heart and soul where all things began.

She pressed herself to him, as if desiring to seek for more of the same, but they had reached the end. The rhythm to which they moved was a pulsing beat from within, the song marching to that rhythm, the beats of their hearts combined. She was the center of his mind, and no thought but of her could exist so long as she was this near. He needed her, wanted her to stay forever. Knew it could never be so.

Exhausted, she had begun to drop, able to withstand no more. Slowly, she pulled away until contact had broken. Then she rested against him, her sweat-slicked skin sliding neatly across his. He breathed out, but he couldn't let his eyes close. Not with something else that nearby. Even with her wrapped in his arms he held to the foreboding feeling she was not safe from that approach. Someone was coming.

"Dâ€|" "

"Call me Sali." He answered.

A silly grin smeared across her face. "You have no idea how much alike to a girl's name that sounds, do you?"

"I care not."

She giggled. "Okay."

"You were going to ask something?"

"Iâ€| no. No, I don't think I was." She decided. "I was just thinking how long we could stay hereâ€| like thisâ€| because I don't ever want to leave."

"You will." He answered, simply.

She sighed. He was right, again, as usual â€" either by death and disposal if found, or on her own power in escaping that fate, she would, eventually, leave. "Will you come with me?"

"You know I want to."

"Oh, Sali. Don't be that way. Lie to me just once."

He turned his head, to see her. "You ask the impossible of me."

She giggled. "Are we really so glued to our honor, great warrior?"

The comment made him smile. "We are."

Her mirth faded, then. "Will I ever see you again?"

"What does your heart tell you?"

She looked up, to meet his gaze. "I want to." She paused. "Iâ€| will." If it was the last thing she ever did, if it cost her her lifeâ€| she knew she would. "I will see you again, Sali."

He smiled at her. For her. "Fear not for me. I will be there, to be seen."

"Would you do that for me?" She asked, beginning to get a sparkle in her eye again. "Would you really?"

"Promise."

The pain coursing through his arms had crawled up his neck, and a clawed hand of pure agony had a death grip on his chest. His breath came shorter and shorter, but he hadn't the wont to scream anyway. The throng of Brutes below the stage where he was would gain no such pleasure from him. But the pain the energy bonds were conveying through his nerve clusters didn't amount to half the agony he felt. There was a sickening, poisonous feeling of lossâ€| betrayal for one he sought nothing less than the opposite towards. His promise had

broken the moment he had fallen, been caught, and had fallen at his hooves in pieces when the door to his cell had closed the first time.

There would not be anything left of him and even though this was more a glory rant for the Brutes and their fallen Prophet hierarchs, this method had been perfected over centuries on his people. Truth, the Human Demon, most of the Human Fleet even a great amount of the New Covenant Fleet had all gathered at Earth and gone through what was reportedly being called a portal. To somewhere.

It was anybody's guess, but here now he stood at the wrong end of frustration. His people had given the Brutes a real hard run, ever since the Separation of the Covenant and his people had split from it. Tattered threads of the remnants of that long occupation could still be found.

Here, he was being publicly tortured for the sake of a mass of drooling apes. So they could see a Sangheili fall and just the way they wanted one to. Finally, smoke curling from his sagging form, the cuffs were deactivated. The Prophet turned to face him, then.

Leaning close, he could just hear him speaking "one word, over and over. It was a mystery to the Prophet and his Brutes alike. Why, they would never know, he kept the word "_Similar_" on his lips.

End

End
file.